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ABSTRACT

Noting that a number of Australian states have adopted a functional model of language in their English syllabus documents, this PEN explains the term "functional model" and explores the implications of a functional approach to the teaching of English across all key learning areas in the Australian primary classroom. The paper notes that the term "functional" comes from the systemic functional theory based on the work of Michael Halliday. The paper next discusses the assumptions a functional approach takes, including language as a social process, spoken texts are just as complex as written texts, and the context in which language is used determines its appropriateness. The paper also discusses terms used in the functional model (including "field," "tenor," "mode") and three levels of language (semantic, lexicogrammatical, and graphophonic). The paper discusses implications for teachers, such as valuing the diversity of language backgrounds, providing meaningful language activities, valuing talk, and using real texts (both literary and factual). The paper then presents a short case study illustrating implications for students. The paper concludes with advice for teachers on how to begin. Contains seven references and a list of five additional resources. (RS)

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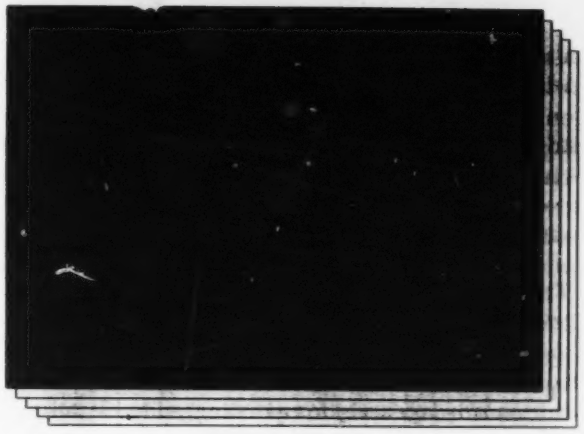

Over the last few years a number of Australian states have adopted a functional model of language in their English syllabus documents. This PEN explains the term 'functional model' and explores the implications of a functional approach to the teaching of English across all key learning areas in the primary classroom.

Media reports prompted by the release of the K–6 English Syllabus in New South Wales have claimed that the adoption of a functional approach implies a 'back to basics' teaching of grammar. However, if that is understood as a return to the teaching of traditional grammar (such as many of us experienced in the 1960s), the claims are misleading. A functional model of language does incorporate a functional approach to grammar, but it is not the same as traditional grammar. Nor is it something that teachers can learn overnight. It needs to be understood in the context of a functional model of language, and that takes time.

As with most things new, a functional model includes terms that may initially be unfamiliar or strange. However, it is important for us as teachers to resist being overwhelmed by them — rather we should see the learning of new concepts as enhancing our own knowledge of language and informing our work with our students. Familiarity will help us to decide how much of the terminology it will be useful to introduce to particular groups of children.

Where does the term 'functional' come from?

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The term 'functional' applied to language is derived from the *systemic functional theory* — a coherent theory of language development and use based on the work of Michael Halliday (1975, 1985a, 1985b). It continues to be modified and developed both by Halliday himself and by others, including Ruquiya Hasan (1986) and Jim Martin (1984).

A functional model recognises that language is part of almost every aspect of our lives (sometimes accompanying an activity and sometimes the focus of an activity), and goes on to explain that it is a system which we use to construct meanings for a whole range of different purposes. Thus we will use the same pool of language resources, but in different ways, when we are sharing an experience (*Last Monday we went to the show . . .*), writing an essay (*The main reasons for supporting the conservation movement are . . .*), asking for help (*Excuse me, could you please tell me when the next bus leaves?*), or thinking about an experience (*I wonder whether . . .*). Further, we may choose to use words differently to achieve the same purpose in different situations. Imagine for a moment that you want your living room door closed. *Close the door!* is what you might say sharply to a child who habitually leaves doors open. *Would you mind closing the door please?* is what you might say to a guest when you are carrying a tray yourself. A functional approach asserts that we need to learn how to choose our language to meet the particular needs of a situation.

In the last few decades many educational writers have suggested that educational failure is often really language failure. More particularly, Halliday has suggested that the child who fails to achieve at school often does so because he or she has not understood the functional uses of language in the range of ways the school demands.

What assumptions does a functional approach make?

Language is a social process. Any text, spoken or written, serves a social function or has a social component. Even when we talk or write for ourselves alone, we are using language in ways shaped by our interaction with others. Language is at the centre of our construction of reality and our own identity, and it is our chief means of communicating with others. In learning to make meaning through language we also learn to become members of a particular cultural group.

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Language is a system of choices, a resource for making meaning. We make choices depending on our purpose for using language in a particular context. So, for instance, I would choose my words rather more carefully if I were meeting a distinguished person for the first time than if I were having a conversation with a close and trusted friend.

The word 'text' refers to any organised pattern of meaning. Until recently we have been accustomed to use 'text' to refer to written documents, partly because our culture has tended to place a high value on written language and correspondingly devalue talk and oral storytelling traditions. However, spoken texts are just as important as written ones, although their patterns of meaning are characteristically more fluid. Visual texts (illustrations, diagrams, paintings, etc.) offer equally valid ways of making meaning, but their graphic language falls outside the scope of this PEN.

Spoken texts are just as complex as written texts. But they are organised differently and are complex in different ways (visual texts have their own intricacies too). Of course many spoken texts are now recorded and can be studied in the same way as written texts.

Any text created will be a product of its culture and its situation. Take your current class language unit, for example: it is located within a cultural context (late twentieth-century, multicultural Australian society probably, with a strong valuing of the written tradition) and must meet the requirements set down by your education system and the policy of your school. Yet it is also part of a more specific context related to the individual needs, abilities and interests of your class and the particular situation you share with them (e.g. it may be restricted to one key learning area — English — or integrated across several). Any text created in your classroom will be located within these two aspects of context — the broader cultural group you are a part of and a particular situation within that culture.

Consider how these fragments of text can be easily identified as products of our culture and a particular situation within it:

Good afternoon. May I help you? *Good morning, 6F.*

MMMM . . . It's MacTime! *Once upon a time ...*

Despite their brevity, each of these fragments implies a particular context. Text and context are inter-dependent — in the words of the song, 'you can't have one without the other'.

Different situations require us to use different language patterns (or *registers*), which give rise to different text forms (or *genres*). When I write out a recipe for a friend, I use a language pattern different from the one I use when sending her a holiday post-card, and the resultant texts are structured differently. In some ways these different patterns and text forms are predictable. So, when I'm withdrawing money at the bank, I can predict a number of elements in my conversation with the teller: she will ask me how I want the money and I will ask her what's left in my account. Other elements will be optional — an exchange about the weather or the time of year, or how quickly money disappears!

The context in which language is used will determine its appropriateness. When I ring my mother, I often begin by saying, 'Hi! It's only me.' She usually replies, 'Hallo, only you.' But that way of beginning a phone conversation is only appropriate because of the particular relationship we have developed over many years, and I'd probably be regarded as quite mad or eccentric if I greeted anyone else in the same way. More generally, informal words like 'Hi!', Okay?' and 'Righto' routinely punctuate our everyday talk with friends, but they are not usually appropriate in a formal speech or in written text.

Our language changes over time and is changed by the way we use it. Our usage of our language system continually changes it: vocabulary and acceptable grammatical patterns come and go. Consider, for example, how letter writing conventions have fairly recently tended to lighten punctuation in dates and addresses. Or how the words 'cool' and 'excellent' are now used in our students' everyday talk to signify something quite different from their conventional dictionary meanings. When I was young, the word 'wireless' was still current as an alternative to 'radio', but when I recently asked a Year 3 class what a wireless was, no one knew. Conversely, the term 'rollerblading' became part of my vocabulary only a few years ago. Our language system is dynamic and ever-changing because we use it to meet the changing needs of our particular culture.

What do the terms used in the functional model mean?

Field, tenor and mode

A functional model uses the concepts of *field*, *tenor* and *mode* to describe how a text makes meaning within the context of a particular situation. These are the three features of the situation which influence the way language is used in the text. They have their counterparts in three broad functions of language which are reflected in the choices from the language system (e.g. choices of wording) that can be seen in any

text. These broad functions are called the *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual metafunctions*.

Feature of context	Function of language
field: what the text is about	→ *ideational metafunction*
tenor: the relationship between speaker/writer and listener/reader	→ *interpersonal metafunction*
mode: how the text is constructed	→ *textual metafunction*

The relationships between these features and functions are best understood through examples.

Imagine that you are teaching a Year 6 class in an inner-city suburb when your school is informed that the local council wishes to resume part of an old laneway running behind two of the school buildings. It is used as part of the school playground but the council wants to turn it over to off-street parking. When you tell your class they are disturbed; they see the proposal as unjust because most of them have little space to play at home and there are few parks in the area. They resolve to write to the council.

In this scenario the context of culture is your inner-suburban Year 6 class with all the cultural complexities suggested above, while the context of situation is the children's concern about the council's plans to resume part of the school playground (which gives the letters they plan to write a real purpose).

Initially you spend time researching facts about the school playground and the children's recreational space at home. You may calculate the amount of playground area that will be lost per student. Having built up some field knowledge, you discuss the issues from the students' perspective and then model the steps involved in writing a formal letter of complaint. After a session in which you jointly construct a letter, the students write individual letters expressing their concerns. With the usual conventions of date and address observed, one of the letters might look like this:

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am in 6G at ____ Primary School. We have been using Rutherglen Lane as part of our school playground for as long as I have been at the school. I am very worried about your plan to take back this part of the lane for parking spaces.

Most of us live in flats or terrace houses near the school and there is nowhere for us to play soccer or cricket or even to rollerblade except in the school playground. We sometimes play there on the weekends because there are no parks near us either. If you take the laneway back we will lose the space to play these games.

I think it might be dangerous to have so many cars so close to the school buildings as well.

I hope you can find somewhere else to make some more parking space.

Yours sincerely,

The letters to the council are all about the students' concern at the threatened loss of their playground space. This is called the *field* of the text — the term that refers to what a text is about. The linguistic features of the text which are concerned with its content or ideas and therefore relate to the field are called the *ideational metafunction*.

In their letters the students need to set out their concerns politely but convincingly so that the council will realise how worried they are. The letters are written formally because the students are addressing people they do not know; moreover, unlike the students, the council members have a special public status. These conditions determine the *tenor* of the letters — the term that refers to the relationship between the people involved in the making and receiving of a text. The tenor is realised by the *interpersonal metafunction* of the language.

Finally, since it is more appropriate to create a formal record of concern by initially writing about such issues (rather than phoning or talking to the person at reception), written text has been chosen for these particular communications. This is called the *mode* of the text — the term that refers both to the channel chosen (spoken, written or a combination) and to how the language itself is organised. The *textual metafunction* of the language relates to the mode, or how the text makes coherent meaning in the chosen channel.

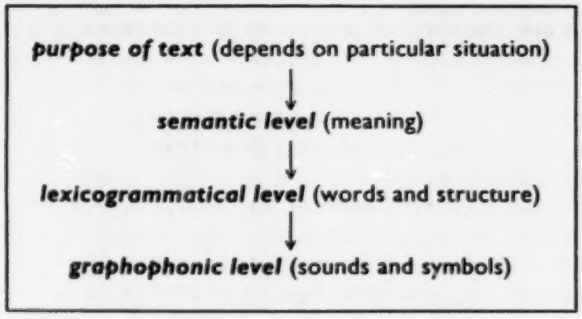
All three variables of a text are interdependent and they combine to form a particular kind of text which makes sense in a particular social context.

(Incidentally, the scenario sketched above is based on fact. The children's letters were so persuasive that the council sent one of its town planning officers to talk to them. The teacher and children then spent time working on an oral presentation, complete with diagrams and the results of a school survey on playing space. The council eventually decided not to resume the laneway and erected fences blocking it off.)

Three levels of language

The language system operates at three levels. First of all, a text operates as a whole at the *semantic* level to make meaning. To make meaning, however, we depend on the *lexicogrammatical* (*lexis*/vocabulary + grammar) level of language, or the way words are structured in sentences and clauses. It is at this second level, then, that grammar fits into a functional approach to language. This level is in turn expressed through the

third or *graphophonic* level — the sounds and symbols of the language system.


purpose of text (depends on particular situation)
semantic level (meaning)
lexicogrammatical level (words and structure)
graphophonic level (sounds and symbols)

What are the implications for teachers?

Valuing the diversity of language backgrounds

Teachers who adopt a functional model of language will value the different ways of talking and different orientations to language and literacy that students from a whole range of backgrounds bring to the classroom. A particular way of speaking will not be judged bad or wrong just because it does not conform to Standard Australian English. Rather it may be seen as perfectly appropriate when used in a particular context (e.g. during a playground game). However, it is important for students to recognise that slang is not appropriate in more formal spoken or written contexts. This is one aspect of learning how to use confidently the kinds of text that carry more power in our society, which is something *all* students must be enabled to do.

Providing meaningful language activities

Teachers need to think carefully to ensure that all language activities are purposeful. And they need to plan for a variety of purposes, encouraging children to share information and opinions, ask questions, entertain, argue, reflect on ideas and attitudes and make sense of their world. Many of these real purposes will develop from units in other key learning areas.

Introducing a range of texts

It is important to program teaching and learning activities that will involve students in examining a whole range of texts, both spoken and written, and the purposes for which they are constructed. Students will also need to be given time to explore these different text types themselves. A range of texts (e.g. procedures, factual reports, explanations, discussions, arguments) should be introduced and discussed early in a child's schooling, alongside the more customary story or narrative texts. Children can then begin to see how different texts are structured in different ways because of the different reasons they are created. A traditional fairy story, for example, will often begin with a phrase like *Once upon a time* or *Long ago*, while a recipe will begin with a list of ingredients. Of course, many texts are mixtures of a number of different text forms (genres) and students need to be able to recognise these variations and learn how to use them themselves.

Valuing talk

A functional approach affirms the importance of talk in a school culture which has been inclined to devalue spoken texts and overvalue written ones. Consequently teachers will need to demonstrate the differences between spoken and written texts. Spoken language, for example, can draw on resources like intonation, pause, loudness and body language, which often communicate meaning more powerfully than the words themselves. By contrast, written language uses punctuation and more formal lexicogrammatical structures to communicate information. And because the reader can generally return to a written text, information tends to be packed more densely than it is in a spoken one.

Debates, talks to the whole class about a self-chosen topic, group or paired talk about a novel or an excursion, small group discussion about a particular issue — all will be valuable classroom activities alongside more formal written tasks. Jay Lemke (1989, p. 136) has remarked that it is important to 'translate the patterns of written language into those of spoken' because spoken language is 'the medium in which we understand'. But it is equally important to translate spoken language into written forms and help students to realise that most forms of written text are not just spoken language written down.

Real texts, not reading schemes

Real texts (both literary and factual) will more readily meet the needs of a teacher using a functional approach than those contrived specifically to control vocabulary and sentence structure. Real texts have been created because the author has something to share. They are coherent and meaningful, whereas contrived texts are often constructed with an overemphasis on letter-sound relationships, a limited set of vocabulary choices or a focus on over-simplified sentence structures. (For a detailed discussion of differences between real and contrived texts, see Unsworth and Williams 1990.)

Explicit modelling and joint construction

Most teachers already have a sufficiently well-developed understanding of how language works to meet the needs of various situations. Talking explicitly about these understandings will be extremely helpful for students, and the modelling and joint construction of different kinds of texts will provide plenty of opportunity to do so. You might explain, for example,

how a recount is almost always written in the past tense, starting with an introductory statement that orients the reader to the experience being revisited: *Last Friday SF visited the Quarantine Station* . . . You might contrast this with a newspaper report, which will be written in the past tense too but will begin with an attention-grabbing headline and summarise the main elements of the story in the first sentence. On another occasion you might show how an article about the way the Australian Parliament works will be written in present tense because it describes something currently in operation. Tense is just one feature at the grammatical level of language which is determined by the particular purpose of writing.

Learning a language to talk about language

Teachers need to develop a special language for talking about language (what is sometimes called a *metalanguage*) and, as mentioned earlier, this will take time. It is clear that students too need to develop an ability to talk about language form, but it is not yet clear how much functional grammar terminology will help to improve their abilities in talking, listening, reading and writing. Currently many projects are under way to explore the use of metalanguage terms at different grade levels. Nevertheless an understanding of different text types and how they are realised through their grammatical structures will enable teachers to talk in a direct way with students about their writing. They will be able to demonstrate why a factual report about dinosaurs needs to be organised differently from a recount about the film *Jurassic Park* or an imaginary story about life in a prehistoric era.

What are the implications for students?

One of the most important lessons for students (and many parents) to learn will be the value of *talk* in helping them develop their literacy ability. They will have opportunities to read, listen to and jointly construct different texts, both as a whole class and in small groups, and then talk about their understandings. Instead of focusing almost exclusively on learning *through* language, they will also be encouraged to learn *about* language. They will be able to explore how the form of a text contributes to its meaning and talk about how texts are constructed for particular purposes. They will learn to talk and write meaningfully in a variety of contexts with different audiences in mind.

A short case study

The text given below was written by three eleven-year-old girls as part of a Science & Technology unit on communication. Their task was to choose a form of communication they were interested in and then find out information under three headings suggested by their class teacher: who invented it, how it works and some examples of its current use. The teacher had already reminded the whole class about the schematic structure of a factual report, which they had explored previously (i.e. general opening statement, new paragraph for each new fact or group of facts, concluding general statement).

The students consulted a range of factual texts in the school library and made notes. They were encouraged to use point form and write down facts in their own words. The three girls then discussed their notes and drafted the following text:

> *In March, 1876, a scottish American named Alexander Graham Bell, invented one of the most commonly used ways of communicating over long distances. He invented the telephone.*
>
> *The telephone can be made to work because sound travels through the air in waves. Speech is carried by the waves in the air stirred up by the vocal chords in the throat.*
>
> *Here are some of the modern ways it is used today: The Fax machine, the video phone, the mobile phone, the touch phone and Modems. (computers).*

The written text was accompanied by a diagram of sound waves travelling and a drawing of an up-to-date touch phone.

In talking with these girls about the text, the class teacher might have asked them to elaborate each section as they found out more about the telephone. For instance, she might have queried whether sound travels through telephone lines in the same form as it travels through the air. She might also have pointed out that their text has no general statement at the beginning or the end: in fact it begins like a historical recount, just as the second paragraph is like an explanation. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this of course; real life writing blends elements of basic text forms all the time. But the overall organisation and coherence of the draft could certainly be improved, and the teacher might have taken the opportunity to reinforce the lesson that a written text often takes time and several drafts to reach its final form.

How do I begin?

It is most helpful to begin by looking at whole texts and at how they are spoken and written for different purposes. By exploring how texts are organised and the way they construct meaning or layers of meanings, you will build up confidence in your own knowledge of field, tenor and mode and different text forms or genres. When you are confident with text organisation

at the meaning or semantic level, you can look more closely at the lexicogrammatical level of language. Remember that you already have a wealth of experience about the way our system of language works and that your knowledge of grammatical terms will develop over time.

It is also helpful to choose a range of real experiences around which to structure language activities in your classroom. Use school events, media happenings, literary and factual texts and students' personal experiences as springboards for meaningful language activities across the curriculum. Provide lots of opportunities for students to talk explicitly about differences in text form and help them record the differences. Build up their understandings of the differences between spoken and written texts by examining examples of both. (Readers theatre may be useful here because it allows students to create scripts from literature for group storytelling and explore differences in the process.)

Sharing your own language expertise through modelling, joint construction of texts and discussion with individuals about their talking and writing will help students to feel supported in negotiating different sorts of texts. Talking explicitly about how language is being used, not just what the language is about, will become part of your English curriculum.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate the value of a functional approach to language and literacy learning in the primary classroom (its field). It has been written in a fairly informal style (its mode) from one primary teacher to others (its tenor). It has suggested that as teachers we need to provide opportunities for children to explore a range of text forms so that they will learn more about how our language system works to make meaning in many different ways and on many different levels. While adopting a functional approach to literacy and language learning will be challenging, it can certainly help our students to go beyond learning through language to understand more about using language in meaningful ways.

Where can I look for more help?

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